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America's Lost Egalitarian Tradition

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## *America's lost egalitarian tradition*

Egalitarianism assumes many shapes in contemporary America: equality of opportunity, equality of rights, racial equality, sexual equality, equal justice, equal pay for equal work, and more. One egalitarian ideal is, however, conspicuously absent from most American public discussions: the ideal of equal wealth. Although complaints about economic inequality arise from the margins, the subject passes virtually unnoticed in our political debates. Apparently, most Americans find nothing unjust about gross disparities of economic resources, so long as every citizen is given a reasonable chance to prosper. Discrimination, prejudice, extreme poverty, and other enormities may endanger the stability and prestige of the republic (although there is intense disagreement about how

much they do so anymore). Yet staggering inequalities of wealth, in and of themselves, pose no such threat in most Americans' eyes.<sup>1</sup>

This was not always true.

At the time of the nation's founding, Thomas Jefferson, the slaveholding democrat, famously decried the "numberless instances of wretchedness" that stemmed from gross inequalities of property. Jefferson recognized that "an equal division of property is impracticable." Nevertheless, he observed (in a letter to James Madison) that "enormous inequality" produced "much misery to the bulk of mankind" – so much misery that "legislators cannot invent too many devices for subdividing property, only taking care to let their subdivisions go hand in hand with the natural affections of the human mind."

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<sup>1</sup> The best study to date of Americans' attitudes toward wealth distribution is James L. Hutson, *Securing the Fruits of Labor: The American Concept of Wealth Distribution, 1765–1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998). Although I have differences with Hutson's interpretations, in this essay I have drawn generously from the materials and analysis in his important book. I would also like to thank Joyce Appleby for some cogent criticisms of an earlier draft of this essay. Readers interested in citations for specific quotations may contact the author at [swilentz@princeton.edu](mailto:swilentz@princeton.edu).

Jefferson's sometime friend and sometime antagonist, the Massachusetts conservative John Adams, agreed, noting that concentrations of wealth in the hands of the few ultimately bred tyranny over the many. "The balance of power in a society," Adams wrote in 1776, "accompanies the balance of property in land." Only by making "the acquisition of land easy to every member of society . . . so that the multitude may be possessed of landed estates," Adams believed, could power be secured "on the side of equal liberty and public virtue."

Similar formulations appeared throughout the infant republic, cutting across lines of party, region, and ideology. Noah Webster, the staunch Connecticut Federalist, claimed in support of the Federal Constitution in 1787 that "*a general and tolerably equal distribution of landed property is the whole basis of national freedom,*" and "*the very soul of a republic.*" A year later, a Virginia Anti-Federalist writing under the pseudonym "The Impartial Examiner" attacked the proposed Constitution precisely because, he contended, it would enable "a few men – or one – more powerful than all others," to "obtain all authority, and by means of great wealth" to "perhaps totally subvert the government, and erect a system of aristocratic or monarchic tyranny in its room [that is, in its place]." There were, of course, exceptions, all along the political and social spectrums – thinkers who asserted that great economic inequalities between the few and the many were inevitable and even, some said, desirable. In general, however, Americans of otherwise clashing political beliefs agreed with one New Jersey cleric that, in a republic, "there should, as much as possible, be . . . something like an equality of estate and property."

Though not unchallenged, and though open to conflicting interpretations, the

conceptual basics of the egalitarian tradition lasted for a century after the Revolution. Ironically, the so-called consensus school of American historians of the 1940s and 1950s, focused as it was on the nation's historical commitment to individualism and the sanctity of private property, largely ignored the once-prevalent commitment to economic equality. So have most subsequent historians, whether they have defended or attacked the consensus idea.

As a result, we have misunderstood some of the fundamental themes of American history from the Revolution through Reconstruction. And we have likewise misunderstood the complicated political legacy of those themes, from the late nineteenth century down to our own time.

The intellectual origins of America's egalitarian tradition lay in the eighteenth-century antimonarchical politics that culminated in the Revolution. Forged in an overwhelmingly rural and antiaristocratic world, these politics contained two powerful and connected assumptions: first, that human labor is the creator of all wealth; and second, that social and economic disorders are the consequence, and not the cause, of political disorder. These assumptions are alien today, which makes it difficult for modern readers to discern the egalitarian tradition, let alone to comprehend it.

The labor theory of value – the doctrine that all property is derived from human labor – claimed an enormous array of supporters in early national and antebellum America. The concept lay at the core of John Locke's theory of property, as stated in the second of his *Two Treatises on Government*. Followers of such different Enlightenment writers as Volney, David Hume, and Adam Smith took the idea for granted. So did Ameri-

can political agitators and public officials ranging from Sam Adams and John Rutledge in (respectively) revolutionary Massachusetts and North Carolina to Andrew Jackson, John C. Calhoun, and Abraham Lincoln.

A major reason for the labor theory's ubiquity was the ambiguity of its implications, which proved useful to the American colonists. Locke, for example, formulated the labor theory in ways that permitted, indeed encouraged, the subjugation of a variety of "nonproductive" persons, be they nomadic hunters and gatherers or dependent African slaves. American slaveholders naturally assumed that the labor of their slaves did not count as the slaves' own property (although in the late eighteenth century, many slaveholders, aroused by the egalitarianism of the Revolution, had second thoughts). Likewise, slaveholders and non-slaveholders discounted the labor of other bound workers, as well as wives and children. And to the vast majority of settlers, the sojourning hunting and fishing economies of the Native Americans plundered resources but produced nothing. Yet to all free citizens, rights to property arose, as the Pennsylvania democrat George Logan observed in 1791, "from the labor we have bestowed acquiring [it]."

In the agrarian semicommercial economy of revolutionary America, the labor theory of value thus had profoundly hierarchical as well as profoundly egalitarian implications. The tensions between these implications created a dialectic within the egalitarian tradition that would rattle American politics for decades to come.

Still, for the free white men who settled there, America seemed a kind of utopia. Because the vast preponderance of American wealth came from the land, because American land was plentiful,

and because ownership of the land was (compared to the Old World) widely distributed, it followed that free Americans could uniquely avoid great disparities of wealth. Likewise, it followed that most free and productive American households would escape the inequities of past civilizations and fully enjoy what their labor had justly obtained. Of course, all would not be perfectly equal. Some citizens, by dint of extraordinary hard labor or good fortune, would always obtain more property than others, while the lazy or unfortunate would obtain less. But given the limits that nature placed on what the land could produce, there were limits on how far the wealthiest citizen could rise above the poorest. A visionary ideal took hold of a nation where liberty was secure, "so long as Property . . .," meaning land, Ezra Stiles wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1786, "is so minutely partitioned and transfused among the Inhabitants."

To be sure, the available historical statistics on American inequality depict a very different reality. On the eve of the Revolution, according to the findings of Jeffrey G. Williamson and Peter H. Lindert, the richest 1 percent of Americans held over 10 percent of the nation-to-be's wealth, while the richest 10 percent owned roughly half of that wealth.<sup>2</sup> But these figures need to be understood in their larger context. Compared to later periods in American history – and compared to Great Britain and Europe in the 1770s – the degree of economic inequality among nonslaves in Revolutionary America was remarkably low. Moreover, local studies of the colonial era strongly suggest that American inequality wors-

2 Jeffrey G. Williamson and Peter H. Lindert, *American Inequality: A Macroeconomic History* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

ened fairly dramatically in the mid-eighteenth century – a worsening that Americans blamed largely on what one historian has called the “Anglicization” of colonial society during the two decades or so before 1776.<sup>3</sup>

Although they did not live in the classless utopia described by some patriots and astonished foreign visitors, Americans could easily consider their world the closest thing in the history of the West to such a utopia, so long as they relegated slaves and Indians (as many, if not most, did) to special castes, outside society. (Even Thomas Paine, an outspoken antislavery man, could write in 1782 that “[t]here are not three millions of people in any part of the universe, who live so well, or have such a fund of ability, as in America.”) And in this providential setting, Americans interpreted rising inequality among freemen as a by-product of artificial political manipulations by the British and their American allies, as well as of the persistence in the New World of certain undesirable Old World institutions.

Here, Americans’ views on labor and equality conjoined with another conceptual distinction, common in eighteenth-century Anglo-American political thought, between society and government – a distinction that vaunted the former over the latter. In this view, social relations, including trade and commerce, were wholly natural, and, especially in America, they tended strongly

to promote equality. Gross inequality, it followed, was unnatural, the product of laws and customs imposed on society by government – specifically, in America, by hereditary monarchy and aristocracy. To American patriots, observes one historian, commenting on Paine, “[t]he cause of ... wretchedness,” was “political, not economic: the existence of poverty” – the most glaring indication of economic inequality – implied that “something must be wrong in the system of government.”<sup>4</sup>

To a degree not yet fully appreciated by historians, this explosive mixture of the Lockean labor theory of value and anti-aristocratic politics propelled the American radical and reformist movements of the second half of the eighteenth century, including the movement for independence.<sup>5</sup> The idea that the British operated as parasites, feeding off the sacrifices and labor of their productive colonial subjects, cropped up all across Revolutionary America, most famously in Jefferson’s *Summary View of the Rights of British America* in 1774: “America was conquered, and her settlements made, and firmly established, at the expence [sic] of individuals and not of the British public ...,” Jefferson wrote, “and for themselves alone they have a right to hold.” And the same antiaristocratic producerism that helped ignite the Revolution also led Americans to repudiate what they considered the most egregious of their own traditional and inherited political and legal arrangements, not least the laws of entail and primogeni-

3 See John M. Murrin, “Review Essay,” *History and Theory* (1972): 226–275; and Murrin, “‘A Roof Without Walls’: The Dilemma of American National Identity,” in Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter, eds., *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 333–348.

4 Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 93.

5 The best work to date on these themes is Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

ture. By abolishing these practices, Jefferson boasted, Americans “laid the axe to the root of Pseudo-aristocracy.”

Like all modern revolutionaries, the American patriots came to blows quickly after they won their revolution. Those battles, first between supporters and opponents of the Federal Constitution, then between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, eventually produced, in the Hamiltonian financial and commercial system of the 1790s, the single greatest threat to the egalitarian tradition before the Civil War, apart from the institution of slavery itself. Unlike most of the other American revolutionaries, Alexander Hamilton understood inequality neither as some artificial political imposition nor as something to be feared arising in the future, but as an ineluctable fact. Inequality, Hamilton declared in 1788, “would exist as long as liberty existed, and . . . would unavoidably result from that very liberty itself.” His entire program of national debt assumption, a federal bank, and internal taxation aimed to turn that fact toward national prosperity and greatness, by attaching the loyalties (and the purses) of the monied “few” firmly to the federal government, and then channeling their power toward rousing America out of its semicommercial slumbers and developing the new nation’s economic and military capacities.

But Hamilton’s program did not win mass support, and with the Jeffersonians’ so-called Revolution of 1800 and the subsequent dismantling of Hamilton’s innovations, the egalitarian tradition forcefully reasserted itself. To Jeffersonians – and, on certain issues, even some Federalists, like John Adams – Hamilton’s proposals about banks, currency, and debt amounted to a reversion to corrupt, artificial, monopolistic, quasi-aristocratic favoritism extended

to the rich and well-born. The agrarian Republican John Taylor of Caroline charged that Hamilton’s credit system rejected the basic truth that “a democratic republic is endangered by an immense disproportion of wealth” and said that Hamilton’s system would produce “tyrants and slaves – an aristocracy enormously rich, and a peasantry wretchedly poor.” Jefferson’s more moderate friend and Republican ally, James Madison, declared that, although some degree of inequality was inevitable, Hamilton’s plans would severely exacerbate the problem by extending special favors to the elite and thereby enlarging “the inequality of property, by an immoderate, and especially an unmerited, accumulation of riches.” Instead, Madison favored a strong but restrained central government and “the silent operation of laws which, without violating the rights of property, reduce extreme wealth towards a state of mediocrity, and raise extreme indigence toward a state of comfort.”

With the demise of the Federalist Party after 1815 the egalitarian economic ideals of the Revolution stood virtually unchallenged. Although they would survive for another three generations, it would be in a curiously fractured way.

Deepening inequality accompanied the market revolution that transformed the American economy after 1815. In 1860, the richest 1 percent of Americans held nearly 30 percent of the nation’s wealth, more than twice the percentage of the Revolutionary era. Whereas in 1774 the richest 10 percent owned 50 percent of the nation’s wealth, by the outbreak of the Civil War, the equivalent portion of the population controlled nearly three-quarters of the nation’s wealth. The shift did not go unnoticed. Between 1815 and 1860, a host of dissent-

ing movements – organized workingmen, religious and secular communarians, Anti-Masons, radical abolitionists, and more – challenged the idea that America's basic economic and social relations were sound. In more orthodox electoral politics, issues concerning economic justice and inequality exploded with a force that matched that of the 1790s.

Strikingly, however, mainstream political antagonists, and even some radical dissenters, embraced clashing versions of the egalitarian tradition.

The fullest restatements of the established antiaristocratic egalitarianism appeared in the policies and pronouncements of the Jacksonian Democratic Party. Firm believers in the labor theory of value – “Labor the Only True Source of Wealth” was actually a Jacksonian battle cry – the Democrats lambasted wealthy nonproductive drones as “aristocrats,” who held their power and lived off the labor of others by the grace of charters and other privileges granted by the federal and state governments. “Monopoly” became the Jacksonians’ catchword, the demiurge of evil inequality. The Democrats’ great goal was to remove the aristocrats’ hands from the levers of economic power and restore what they considered “natural” commerce, by arousing the great democratic majority of the (newly enlarged) white male electorate.

The central Democratic antimonopoly struggle was President Jackson’s war with the Second Bank of the United States, and the key Democratic document of that struggle – Jackson’s message vetoing the bank’s rechartering in 1832 – was a virtual manifesto of Democratic egalitarianism, containing all of the old revolutionary- and Jeffersonian-era ideals and language virtually intact. Calling the bank a “monopoly,” Jackson

elaborated at length his constitutional reasons for blocking the charter, then launched into a powerful peroration:

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tradition*

It is to be regretted that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes. Distinctions in society will always exist under every just government. Equality of talents, of education, or of wealth can not be produced by human institutions. In the full enjoyment of the gifts of Heaven and the fruits of superior industry, economy, and virtue, every man is equally entitled to protection by law; but when the laws undertake to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society – the farmers, mechanics, and laborers – who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their government. There are no necessary evils in government. Its evils exist only in its abuses. If it would confine itself to equal protection, and, as Heaven does its rains, shower its favors alike on the high and the low, the rich and the poor, it would be an unqualified blessing. In the act before me there seems to be a wide and unnecessary departure from these principles.

It could have been written by a Democratic-Republican in the 1790s.

Jackson’s chief opponents, known first as National Republicans and then as Whigs, viewed the president’s attacks on the bank (as well as on paper money and protective tariffs) with horror as assaults on commerce and property rights that were bound to ruin the nation’s expanding market economy. Yet unlike Hamilton and the High Federalists of the 1790s, the National Republicans and the Whigs of a generation later carefully presented their alternative developmental programs in terms agreeable to the

egalitarian tradition.

Fundamental to the National Republicans' /Whigs' reconciliation to egalitarianism was their success in seizing upon and exploiting ambiguities in the labor theory of value. Jeffersonians and Jacksonians tended to define "labor" narrowly, to mean manual labor or (in the case of Southern planters) direction of the productive agricultural manual labor of slaves. Other occupations – whether they involved living off accumulated fortunes, trading commodities, or speculating – were far more suspect. Bankers, financiers, and bondholders, in particular, struck Democrats as inherently parasitic, quite apart from their monopolistic proclivities – moneyed men who produced nothing, but who made considerable fortunes by living (as John Taylor, among many others, had put it) "upon the labour of the other classes."

By expanding the concept of labor to include all gainfully employed persons, however, the National Republicans and Whigs at once blurred class distinctions, upheld the labor theory of value, and presented themselves as the true friends of the toiling masses. Invidious distinctions between producers and nonproducers, the National Republican manufacturer Tristram Burges declared in 1830, only excited "hostile feelings among men, all equally engaged in one great community and brotherhood of labor for mutual benefit." Lacking a formally titled aristocracy, the United States was a land of unlimited opportunity, where, Edward Everett remarked, "the wheel of fortune is in constant operation, and the poor in one generation furnish the rich of the next." And just as every workingman was a capitalist in classless America, so, the argument followed, every capitalist, like every planter, was a workingman; indeed, as one anonymous writer put it in 1833, in America, "all men are

workingmen."

Inequality, according to the National Republicans and Whigs, stemmed not from imagined corrupt privilege but from individual moral differences and from the Democrats' arbitrary and disastrous class-based rhetoric and policies. Drenched in the evangelical ethical righteousness of the Second Great Awakening, anti-Jacksonians blamed poverty on bad individual choices and on the refusal by some men to exert the basic virtues of industry, economy, and temperance. Government, they insisted, had a duty to help the people effect their individual self-improvement, by enacting temperance reform and by building reformatories, asylums, and new-model prisons (all of which required public taxation). And in order to widen economic opportunities and promote equality, government needed to help accelerate economic development by chartering banks, funding internal improvements, and undertaking other orderly innovations that would, they claimed, benefit all industrious citizens, not merely a privileged few.

The great political emblem of this egalitarian anti-Jacksonianism was the protective tariff. Jacksonians tended to regard protectionism as but another form of unnatural monopoly, granted by government to select elite interests – a mechanism that transferred wealth from hand to hand, enriched the few, impoverished the many, and established what one New Hampshire Democrat called "the basest, most sordid, most groveling of aristocracies . . . a moneyed aristocracy." But for National Republicans and Whigs, tariff protection ratified the harmony of interests between capital and labor and laid a foundation for economic growth and military security that would in turn combat what the protectionist writer Daniel Raymond singled out as a great



evil: "a too unequal distribution of wealth."

While squaring themselves with labor, the Whigs turned the tables on the Jacksonians by also squaring themselves with political democracy. Having denied Democratic charges of "aristocracy," they countercharged that a reborn monarchicalism, under the executive tyrant Jackson and his minions, was ruining the nation's economy, running roughshod over the Constitution, and offering special favors to Jackson's political cronies and supporters. Again, Jackson's war with the Bank of the United States became the flashpoint. Supposedly, by disregarding both Congress and the Supreme Court during the bank struggle, "King Andrew I" had usurped authority, trampled on the people's liberties, and funneled power and property to his own corrupt coterie. The basic conflict was not between the nonproducing few and the producing many, but between despotic, patronage-glutted Democratic rulers and the mass of the people. By that logic, the Whigs were the true democrats, who offered laboring Americans what the publicist Calvin Colton called "the democracy which does them most good; which gives them food, clothing, and a comfortable home, instead of *promises*."

And so, amid the market revolution, the egalitarian tradition survived – but fractured, now, into two distinct versions. Americans continued to believe in the necessity of restraining gross disparities of wealth. They continued to believe that productive men deserved to enjoy the full fruits of their labor. They continued to believe that special interests in politics – either selfish aristocratic monopolists or immoral monarchical demagogues – were chiefly responsible for deepening inequality. By the mid-1840s, these two versions of the egal-

itarian tradition could claim closely matched electoral support nationwide. Thereafter, however, the Jacksonian-era politics of inequality would unravel as westward expansion forced Americans to confront the institution of slavery and its implications for both moral and economic justice.

Charges that chattel slavery directly threatened the American egalitarian tradition dated back to the Revolutionary era. The most radical voices agreed with Thomas Paine that slaves, as human beings, were entitled to be free and enjoy "the fruits of their labors at their own disposal." Other critics, North and South, blamed slavery for encouraging an aristocratic love of luxurious leisure and a despotic temperament among the slaveholders. Still others charged that slavery produced a backward economy, controlled by a small opulent elite that discouraged the wide diffusion of property among nonslaves.

In the South, as the historian David Ramsay of South Carolina noted in 1789, slavery had "led to the engrossing of land, in the hands of a few," in marked contrast to the (by then) mostly free North. It was only after the revival and vast expansion of southern slavery thanks to the post-Revolution cotton boom, however, that a coherent pro-slavery argument emerged. Only then did clashes over slavery become truly politically dangerous. And when that happened, each side tapped into the egalitarian tradition, promoting its own version while accusing the other of trying to impose tyranny on the entire nation.

Political opposition to slavery reached maturity in the Republican Party of the 1850s, an amalgam of Northern antislavery Whigs (whose national party had collapsed) and dissident free-soil

Democrats. Befitting the party's mixed origins, the Republicans' antislavery variant of the egalitarian tradition borrowed elements from both Whig and Democratic thinking, as well as from long-established antislavery arguments. Like the Whigs, Republicans generally vaunted free labor as a harmony of interests in which the humblest industrious man enjoyed what, in 1860, the ex-Whig Abraham Lincoln called "an equal chance to get rich with everyone else." Slavery, by contrast, suppressed what Lincoln called "the true system" by enriching a small group of slaveholders and by denying blacks the chance to improve their condition.

From the antislavery Democrats, the Republicans absorbed a critique of the slaveholders as an aristocracy, who, by aggressive political action, warped American society to advance their peculiar and oppressive institution at the expense of ordinary Americans, slave and free. In 1839, the Ohio antislavery Democrat Thomas Morris observed that the moneyed aristocracy of the North, which he called the Money Power, had forged a fresh alliance with the southern slaveholders, which he called the Slave Power, "both looking to the same object – to live on the unrequited labor of others." Whereas orthodox Jacksonians described slaveholders as honorable producers, antislavery Democrats such as Morris relegated the slaveholders to the category of aristocrats, at war with ordinary men's property and liberty. Thereafter, attacks on the aristocratic Slave Power became a staple of political antislavery appeals, culminating in the Republican declarations of the 1850s.

Republican attacks on the slaveholder aristocracy went hand in hand with a vindication of their own inclusive version of the labor theory of value, and with their defense of an America in

which disparities of wealth would be limited. Lincoln, in his momentous debates with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858, stated plainly the Republican belief "[i]n the right to eat the bread, without the leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns." Slavery violated this fundamental idea, Republicans claimed, both by robbing slaves of their just rewards and by degrading the dignity of all labor by turning laborers into chattel, constrained by force. With these aristocratic affronts to labor, slavery deepened gross economic inequalities between the haves and the have-nots – the latter including slaves and most freemen.

Pro-slavery spokesmen, concentrated after 1854 in the southern wing of the Democratic Party, had a more difficult time adapting the established egalitarian tradition to their cause. In promoting slavery as a positive good, they often found themselves explicitly repudiating the natural rights legacies of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson. Some openly praised the virtues of aristocracy, though they made clear that they opposed hereditary aristocracy. And any honest defense of slavery required an admission that certain inequalities were inevitable and, indeed, decreed by God – that, as Abel Upshur asserted, "one portion of mankind shall live upon the labor of another portion."

Yet despite their aristocratic pretensions, slavery's advocates, the most reactionary American political force of the nineteenth century, turned to and reworked the egalitarian tradition. It was not (as Louis Hartz once argued) that the slaveholders, deep down, remained Lockean liberals. Rather, pro-slavery writers adapted those pieces of the Lockean and revolutionary legacies that suited their purposes, in part to secure the support of southern white non-slave-

holders. Repeatedly they described their labor system as more egalitarian – for whites – than the supposedly “free” labor of the North.

George Fitzhugh, perhaps the greatest admirer of feudalism to emerge from the pro-slavery ranks, dedicated much of his writing to attacking the economic injustice and inequality of the North. Although Yankees boasted of their adherence to the labor theory of value, Fitzhugh declared, in fact, “*Labor makes values, and wit exploits and accumulates them.*” Northern “freedom,” Fitzhugh proclaimed, amounted to forsaking all sense of responsibility and permitting nonlaboring employers to earn their livelihoods off the sweat of their workers, while compelling the workers to accept subsistence wages – on pain of joblessness and starvation. Under slavery, however, the slaves, as valuable property, were assured of a decent living standard, while southern whites supposedly lived in something far closer to economic equality than northerners. The prominent South Carolina slaveocrat James H. Hammond, who like Fitzhugh accepted the idea that slavery created an aristocracy, went on to describe that aristocracy as a remarkably large and democratic one, consisting of every freeman: “Be he rich or poor, if he does not possess a single slave, he has been born to all the natural advantages of the society in which he is placed, and all its honors lie open before him, inviting his genius and industry.”

Just as antislavery forces moved slaveholding planters from the category of “producers” to “nonproducers,” so the pro-slavery forces retained the idea, older than the Constitution, that black slaves fell outside consideration as part of American society proper and formed what Hammond called a “mudsill” class of inferior beings – a class whose sub-

mission guaranteed white freemen’s equality. Slavery furthermore promoted a variation of what Northern Whigs and Republicans liked to call an underlying harmony of interests – between superior and inferior, in the organic connection between white master and black slave, but also between white equals. So long as the planters preserved (indeed, after 1830, enlarged) the suffrage rights of non-slaveholders, so long as the white majority of non-slaveholding yeoman were permitted to enjoy the full fruits of their labor, so long as tax burdens remained light, and so long as the non-slaveholders raised no objections to slavery, there would be no exploitation of whites by whites.

Seen through this lens, even the slaveholders’ familiar stance on states’ rights has its connection to the egalitarian tradition, as a variation on the idea that economic and social injustice was rooted in political tyranny. According to John C. Calhoun, the ablest pro-slavery political theorist, the framers had designed “a democratic federal republic” in which the states “retained their separate existence as independent and sovereign communities.” Unfortunately, the work of the framers was flawed by their failure to provide the states with an explicit veto power over federal legislation, thereby allowing pro-consolidation Federalists, beginning with Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall, to advance what Calhoun called “the national impulse.” And in the 1830s, the National Republicans/Whigs turned themselves into the numerical balance of power in national politics and compelled the Jacksonian parties, bit by bit, to abandon the South and the animating spirit of the Revolution. The federal government, Calhoun charged, had aggressively usurped power, and created “a great national consolidated democracy . . . as

despotic as that of the Autocrat of Russia, and as despotic as any absolute government that ever existed." The South's blessed slaveholders' democracy was under siege by a corrupt and hypocritical northern democratic absolutism.

As the controversies over dispensation of the western territories grew unavoidable, so the Jacksonian political alignments crumbled. Civil war proved unavoidable. And in the aftermath of that war, the victorious Union made the last notable effort in our history to vindicate the old egalitarian tradition.

As the former Confederate secretary of the treasury Christopher G. Memminger noted soon after Appomattox, reconstruction turned entirely "upon the decision which shall be made upon the mode of organizing the labor of the African race." To Republicans, moderate and radical, the only possible solution was to organize the ex-slaves' labor along the lines familiar in the North, by eradicating the slaveholding aristocracy and ensuring that every freedman would receive the full harvest of his labor.

In the broadest terms, ex-slaves agreed. "[W]e . . . understand freedom," a mass meeting of blacks in Petersburg, Virginia, resolved in June of 1865, "to mean industry and the enjoyment of the legitimate fruits thereof."

But reinventing the egalitarian tradition in order to include the ex-slaves proved to be an overwhelming task. Radical Republicans, led by Thaddeus Stevens, believed that only comprehensive economic and political reform, including mass redistribution of rebel lands to the freedmen, would suffice – proposals that, not surprisingly, met with intense opposition in the white South.

In the North as well, calls to redistribute southern land ran afoul of what most

Republicans and old-line Democrats considered acceptable under the egalitarian tradition (with its insistence on the inviolability of private property). Worse, northern businessmen pointed out, redistribution would play havoc with the staple-based agriculture that was the foundation of southern prosperity and (not incidentally) a source of northern profits. Worse still, land redistribution in the South might encourage increasingly restive northern workers to undertake some similar sort of revolution.

There was, however, one area in which radical and more moderate Republicans, as well as freed slaves, could agree: the imperative of black suffrage in the South as a means to promote economic equality. And in this respect, Reconstruction was in line with the basic concepts of the old egalitarian tradition. Without black suffrage, George Julian observed, former slaveholders would reassume political power and make "the condition of the freedmen more intolerable than slavery itself." But as long as the political monopoly of the slaveholders was broken, enfranchised blacks would have the power to prevent the reemergence of aristocracy and inequality.

The guarantee of black voting, proclaimed the free black Republican Oscar J. Dunn of Louisiana, preserved the essence of America's revolutionary legacy, which was to abolish all "hereditary distinctions" and bar the door from "the institution of aristocracy, nobility, and even monarchy." If black suffrage would not have the sudden cataclysmic effect on the distribution of wealth that radical redistribution would have, it would at least open up the strong possibility of further change, and of greater economic equality, in the South. Black suffrage, lamented one ex-Confederate political leader, was a revolution, "and nobody

can anticipate the action of revolutions.”

The slackening of Republican free-labor reformism amid the depression of the 1870s, and the final abandonment of Reconstruction in 1877, marked a signal defeat for the prewar Republican version of the egalitarian tradition. As a resurgent racism fed charges that the black-supported Reconstruction governments were hopelessly corrupt, and as southern blacks became entangled in a sharecropping system that meant virtual debt peonage, the tradition that had beckoned to a vibrant egalitarian free-labor South looked shaky.

Thereafter, the emergence of enormous new business corporations and trusts and the rise of an all-too-conspicuous American plutocracy battered existing egalitarian assumptions. Suddenly, basic verities – that American abundance and republican government would guarantee workers the full fruits of their labor; that respect for competition, private property, and contracts would, in America, foster a rough equality – were dashed. A gigantic force unknown to earlier generations – what one liberal critic would call “the devil of private monopoly” – was now in the saddle.

A revolution in economic thought, begun in the 1860s and 1870s, both hastened and justified the emergence of the new economic order. The labor theory of value, so fundamental both to formal political economy and to popular thinking about economic justice before the Civil War, proved irrelevant to understanding numerous vital aspects of the corporate economy, from the setting of prices to adjustments in the money supply. More important, economists who accepted the new order accepted the rise of huge corporations as perfectly natural – an inevitable outcome of technological breakthroughs rather than of

political or entrepreneurial changes. Indeed, economists effectively divorced the corporate economy from politics altogether, and insisted that whereas earlier monopolies had been the creation of political favoritism, the modern corporation – or what some experts called “cooperation” – arose strictly out of objective market forces. Economics, as a self-regulating sphere of its own, supplanted the old egalitarian versions of political economy: “This,” wrote one of the popularizers of the new economic doctrine, Charles R. Flint, “is the difference between monopoly and cooperation, between government favoritism and natural law.”

By the 1920s, the terms on which Americans understood economic inequality had changed utterly. Above all, the old association between inequality and exclusive political privilege dissolved. Far from an unnatural distortion of the invisible hand, caused by political favoritism, gross inequality now turned out to be a perfectly natural result of market forces. Government intervention in the internal operations of business, once considered the foundation of monopoly and exploitation, became the means to promote economic equality. Restraint of government, meanwhile, became the touchstone of the new economics and of conservative pro-business dogma, based on the resurgent principle that inequality was not only inevitable, it was rational and just. Government regulation, in this view, would only distort the natural operations and just outcomes of the market by preventing talented and fortunate Americans from accumulating and possessing as much property as they could.

Still, this wrenching transition – what the great reformer of the new century Robert M. La Follette would call the “vast revolution in economic condi-

*America's  
lost  
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tradition*

tions” – did not destroy the American egalitarian impulse. Instead, its character was dramatically transformed, for now government became the instrument, and not the enemy, of equality.

The Populist movement of the 1890s, though it still spoke in the Jeffersonian-tinged antimonopoly rhetoric of the old egalitarianism, proposed all sorts of government interventions, from price regulation to nationalization of the railroads. Trade unionists and socialists, led by the redoubtable Samuel Gompers and the radical Eugene V. Debs, in turn, deployed the labor theory of value, as Karl Marx had, to criticize the exploitation of labor by capital and to justify union organizing, collective bargaining, and (in Debs’s case) the creation of new forms of commonwealth and industrial democracy.

Thereafter, the Progressives and later the New Dealers of the first half of the twentieth century created the foundations of a new government bureaucracy that, while accepting modern capitalist enterprise, could intervene in the marketplace and (with the new federal income tax and estate taxes) directly redistribute wealth.

Herbert Croly most famously described these efforts as using Hamiltonian means to reach Jeffersonian ends. Later nonsocialist writers, including Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and John Kenneth Galbraith, struggled to reinvent a modern liberal version of the egalitarian tradition, excoriating the hyper-individualist voluntarism of the pre-Depression years and after (expressed most plainly by Herbert Hoover) as an apology for plutocracy that would, eventually, produce economic catastrophe.

In the 1950s and 1960s, this reborn economic egalitarianism became closely intertwined with the governmental interventionism of the civil rights move-

ment. If American civil rights advocates learned any lesson from the disastrous decades after the demise of Reconstruction, it was that positive federal action – backed, if need be, by official force – was fundamental to securing civil rights for blacks. Amid the Second Reconstruction, that impulse became allied as never before with the larger impulse for economic equality, combining most fully during the brief heyday of the Great Society.

Overall, the reinvented proactive egalitarianism of the Progressives, New Dealers, and Great Society liberals was effective in reversing the trends of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while at the same time the United States became the most powerful economy on earth. After 1940, economic inequality abated, to the point where, by 1980, the degree of economic inequality, measured statistically, was roughly the same as it had been in the 1770s. To Americans who came of age between 1940 and 1965, Progressive and New Deal liberalism seemed, for better or worse, to have become the national creed. And to many leading historians during these decades, all of mainstream American political history appeared to be but a variation on the basic values of liberal capitalism.

Yet the merging of modern egalitarianisms, racial and economic, in the 1960s could not, finally, overcome some of the lingering ambiguities of the nineteenth-century egalitarian tradition – ambiguities seized upon by the enemies of economic redistribution. Above all, the old producerist prejudice against “nonproducing parasites” could, as ever, be directed against the beneficiaries of federal reform and largesse as well as against the privileged rich. This redirection became especially easy when

large portions of the public identified those beneficiaries as “backward” blacks, “thoughtless” unmarried welfare mothers, and others who, by dint of ancestry or bad moral choices, sought to get more out of the system than they deserved. Much as the more egalitarian implications of the labor theory of value arose in the 1850s and 1860s, only to be shunted aside in favor of more hierarchical thinking, so the revamped egalitarianism of a century later was vulnerable to a revamped hierarchicalism that posited itself as the soul of democratic justice.

Conservative reaction, held in check during the New Deal and its immediate aftermath, began in earnest in the white South’s “massive resistance” to the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Then, with the rise of the Goldwater movement in 1964, laissez-faire pro-corporate politics joined with laissez-faire anti-civil-rights politics and generated a ferocious power. Following the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, federal intervention – indeed, the federal government itself – became demonized as at no time since southern secession, only now the demonization came from all sections of the country.

Reinforcing that demonization was the conservatives’ successful depiction of virtually all government action as an interference with individual liberty. Here, again, old antiaristocratic themes became the foundation for a revamped attack on the liberal state. In 1860, Andrew Jackson’s sympathetic biographer, James Parton, excoriated what he called the “Paternal-Government party,” the party of born conservatives that wished to mold the world according to its own arrogant visions while destroying individual freedom. That same line of reasoning reappeared in the Reagan era and after as a chief article of the new

conservatism, in attacks on the so-called “nanny state” that would force liberty-loving Americans to obey all sorts of arbitrary regulations, on everything from gun registration to mandatory automobile insurance – supposedly for their own good.

By the early 1990s, the moderating trends of mid-century had reversed themselves once more, as inequality of wealth distribution returned to the levels of the 1920s. The remnants of the old egalitarian, antiaristocratic language became keywords for the new conservatism, intermingled with a reinvented Hooverian “rugged individualism” – George H. W. Bush’s “thousand points of light” – that arrived in the guise of fearless libertarianism.

Whereas nineteenth-century Americans believed that the federal government would unjustly transfer wealth from the middling classes to the wealthy, the late-twentieth-century Right charged, with great political success, that the federal government was unjustly transferring wealth from the wealthy and the middle class to the poor (especially the minority poor). The imagery of parasitic nonproducers became affixed, in this new vocabulary, to the bottom of the social ladder instead of the top. The true monarchs and aristocrats in Reaganite America became the so-called welfare queens and arrogant, elitist, bleeding-heart “brie-and-Chablis” liberals. Collective solutions to ordinary individual problems – through labor unions, civil-rights groups, and other movements partly reliant on the state – became stigmatized as the distorting influence of entitled “special interests.” Collective efforts by private corporations, even those reliant on the state, to secure their own interests passed unnoticed – or won approval as the natural operations of free enterprise.

This conservative reaction put latter-day egalitarians on the defensive, scrambling for some redefinition of purpose. After his own redistributive efforts in the area of health care came to naught, President Bill Clinton was forced to declare that “the era of big government is over.” In place of the Great Society formulas, liberals, when not fending off attacks on progressive taxation and other achievements of earlier decades, looked for smaller programs and indirect redistribution (through tax credits) to improve opportunities for middle-class and poor Americans.

From time to time, liberal officials and office-seekers would rail against the monopolistic corporate special interests – Big Oil, the pharmaceutical companies – but with less consistency and conviction than their Progressive and New Deal predecessors. Outside the liberal and left-wing margins, virtually no one seemed willing to make the case that even mild redistribution was essential to the health of our political system. And the newly regnant conservatives began reenvisioning the American past in their own image, as if Madison, Jefferson, Jackson, and the generation that followed cared a great deal about individual liberty and nothing about economic equality.

But such conservative interpretations have misread the old egalitarian tradition as surely as the liberal consensus historians of the 1940s and 1950s ignored it. During the nation’s first century most Americans held that, in a strong republic, unlike a corrupt aristocracy, labor would be amply rewarded and the gaps between the poor and the rich would be minimized. To compare that egalitarian vision with the striking inequalities of our own time is, to say the least, troubling.

The old egalitarianism, to be sure, proved incapable of meeting the challenges of modern corporate capitalism. An entirely new form of liberal egalitarianism had to replace it – one that, a century later, is besieged by post-Reagan conservatism, with its selective but persuasive appropriation of old egalitarian themes.

But if their thinking about political economy has been rendered obsolete, the old egalitarians’ basic legacy endures, not just in the rhetoric of the New Right, but in the embattled idea that, if it is to survive, a truly democratic government of the people requires a fundamental equality and justice in the distribution of its wealth. Those who would salvage and modernize this lost American tradition had better be about their work.